

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

SENSITIVE

TS 186094

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

24 February 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Reactions to a US Retaliatory Air and Naval Strike
Against North Vietnam Between the DMZ and the 19th
Parallel

Communist Motives in their Current Offensive

1. Hanoi almost certainly does not expect to end the war by military victory; it looks for a political settlement. But the Paris talks make little or no progress. The military situation in South Vietnam, insofar as it moves at all, moves to the Communists' disadvantage. They have wished, therefore, (a) to reverse the impression of loss of momentum in the war and thereby to revive the morale of their own forces while damaging that of the allies, and (b) to bring pressures on the US from domestic and world opinion to make concessions at Paris which would get the negotiations off dead center, and (c) to disrupt the US-GVN relationship and prepare the way for a reconstituted regime in Saigon.

GROUP 1

Excluded from automatic
downgrading and

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2. So far the attacks on cities have been of moderate scale, compared to those of a year ago. Assuming that they continue on approximately this scale, Hanoi probably judges that most of the world, including many of the US public, would consider a US retaliatory bombing of the North disproportionate to the provocation. As a result, domestic and international criticism of the US Government, and pressures for an early settlement, would increase.

3. On the other hand, if the US did not retaliate by some such conspicuous action as bombing the North, then (in Hanoi's judgment) there would be a prospect that the morale of the South Vietnamese Government and people would be damaged, and their relations with the US severely strained.

Communist Reactions to the US Retaliation

4. It is highly unlikely that the postulated US bombing would cause the Communists to suspend or modify their presently contemplated offensive. Indeed, if they have intended only a relatively moderate campaign, the bombing might persuade them that they could increase the intensity of their attacks without prejudicing their cause in world opinion. It is possible also that they might renew military action along the DMZ. We would

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not expect any reaction from either the USSR or Communist China which would substantially affect the situation.

5. North Vietnam would be likely to suspend the Paris talks. Its objective would not be to break them off permanently, but to use the suspension as an instrument of pressure for a renewal of negotiations in conditions more favorable to them.

Reactions in the Non-Communist World

6. The South Vietnamese Government and that of Thailand would be encouraged by the postulated US retaliation. If Communist attacks are long continued, and certainly if they should increase in scope, the South Vietnamese would be gravely disheartened by a US failure to retaliate. They might walk out of the Paris talks.

7. Public concern everywhere about the situation in Vietnam, which has somewhat diminished in recent months, will be revived by the Communist offensive. US bombing of the North would magnify this concern. Much criticism would be directed against the US, whatever the degree of provocation. Demonstrations during President Nixon's European trip would probably be more

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vociferous than previously expected, and perhaps involve larger numbers of participants than would otherwise have been the case.

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